

A Study of Non-Verbal Communication in Yorùbá Novels: The Side Code

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Abstract

Non-verbal communication is a very important aspect of communication which plays a very crucial role in interpersonal relationship. Its role in the accentuation of verbal communication cannot be overemphasized. Existing literature has not given enough attention to side code as a form of non-verbal communication in the Yorùbá novel. This study fills the gap as it examines side code, the contexts in which it occurs in Yorùbá novels with a view to establishing its communicative value. The study adopts semiotic theories of Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce. However, symbolic signification which is one of the major elements of semiotic serves as the major pillar on which this work rests. Four Yorùbá novels: *Ìrìnkèrindò Nínú Igbó Elégbèje* and *Ògbójú Ọḍe Nínú Igbó Irúnmọ̀lẹ̀* by D. O. Fagunwa, *Ojú rí* by Kola Oni and *Şaworoide* by Akinwumi Isola were purposively selected because they have elements of side code and were subjected to semiotic and textual analyses. Side code helps in cultural determinism in the codification of disaster, chaos, lopsidedness, disappointment, success, identification of status of personality and complementarity.

1.0 Introduction

The concept of right and left is a form of non-verbal communication across the globe. The said concept is found in the culture of the people. While some cultures associate negative attributes and events with the left hand side, some other ones associate them with the left hand side and while some associate positive attributes with the right hand side, other ones associate them with the left. This paper investigates the position of the Yorùbá novelists in the positioning of attributes and events on the right and left sides.

2.0 Literature Review

Ajíkobi (1985) provides an insightful study into the concept of right and left. After making a universal survey, he examines the concept at the Yorùbá cultural, religious, trado-medical and political levels. At virtually every level, he avers that the right side is associated with good things while the left side is associated with negative or bad things. He points out that “the Yorùbá even believe that God takes good out of the right hand side than the left...” (p.6). This may not be unconnected with why “traditional Yorùbá parents or guardians do everything possible to prevent or guard their children from the use of the left hand very early in life” (p.9). The left hand, he adds is used for unclean purposes such as blowing of the nose, cleaning of the anus and removing dirty things, and that left handed people are seen as social misfits and public nuisances in many societies of the world. He says that left handers are called ‘Southpaw’ in America and *ọlówó ọ̀sì pọ̀ndọ̀rọ̀* which translates to ‘inactive left-handed people’ in Yorùbá society. Ajíkòbì (1985: 13-14) expresses:

The Yorùbá go to the extent of attaching evils to the left five fingers and good to the right. It is believed that the five fingers on the right hand represent five kinds of good fortune or blessings thus: They are long life (*àìkú*), money, (*ajé*), wife (*aya*), children (*ọmọ*) and victory (*ìṣẹ́gun*) and the left five fingers represent death (*ìkú*), sickness (*àrùn*), fighting (*ìjà*), want of money (*ìpọ̀njú*) and loss (*òfò*).

By implication, good attributes are attached to the right hand fingers while bad attributes are attached to the left fingers.

Ajíkobi (1985:15) further adduces that during sexual intercourse, in Yorùbá society, the man uses his left hand to insert his penis in the woman’s vagina; equally, the woman helps the man to insert his penis with her left hand into her vagina. This, he corroborates by this Yorùbá song:

Onípèékéré ọ!
Ebi ọ̀ lẹ̀ pọ̀mọ̀ tí ń dókó’
Bó bá fòtún gbowó ọ̀
A a fòsì fokó mọ̀ra

Oh ipékeré seller!
An adulterous girl cannot feel hunger
After accepting money with her right hand
She draws the penis nearer to her with her left hand.

He equally believes that the sex of an unborn child is determined by either the left or the right hand side. After a sexual intercourse, the woman is asked to turn to her left side for a few seconds if she wants a female child and that if she wants a male child she is asked to turn to the right side. It is believed, especially by Yorùbá elders, that if such a woman should become pregnant, she would give birth to the sex that relates to the side to which she turns.

Ajíkobi (1985:21–22) attributes stumbling with the left foot as an ill omen signifying failure in any expedition undertaken by such a person while stumbling with the right foot signifies success and a good outcome in the expedition embarked upon by such a person. Therefore, if one is going out and one suddenly unconsciously dashes one's left foot against anything, it is advisable for such a person to go back home, sit down and ponder before planning to go out again, failure of which the journey may hit a brick wall.

Contrary to Ajíkòbí's (1985) conception about left and right, a Yorùbá proverb seems to affirm unity of the opposite:

Òtún wẹ òsì
Òsì wẹ òtún
Lọwọ fí í mó

The right hand washes the left
The left hand, too, washes the right
This makes the hands clean

The proverb above indicates complementarity rather than opposition as posited by Ajíkòbí (1985). This shows that the left and the right hand function to assist each other in the overall success of parts of the human body. These are vehicles used in metaphorical expression. Cooperation is the tenor.

Ilésanmí (2004:110) in discussing the binary theory of complementarity maintains:

But whatever would augur well for reconstruction, creation of new order cannot be said to be oppositional; they are rather complementary. I cannot imagine the combination of the negative and positive ends of an electric wire which provides electric light or functions for coolness in refrigerator or which ignites the vehicle for mobility as being oppositional, it is indeed complementary... The so called positive and negative electrons cannot move without a propelling initiation by Nature (God) since they cannot be said to have their own individual consciousness.

It is what propels them to action that has its desire or goal achieved complementarily. What human beings call crises, produces changes which are often erroneously termed negative or positive. Negativity and positivity are relative or complementary, dependent on how they are managed.

A view at Ilésanmí's (2004), opinion above shows that left and right are complementary rather than opposing to each other as demonstrated by Ajíkòbí. Also, Ajíkòbí's (1985) work is a catalogue of the use of left and right which is based on formalism. However, semiotics is the theoretical concern in this study.

3.0 Theoretical Framework

Saussure emphasizes the social function of the sign; Pierce, on the other hand emphasizes its logical function. Both aspects are closely correlated and today, the two words 'semiology' and 'semiotics' refer to the same discipline with the Europeans using the former and the Americans using the latter. Pierce (1931–58, 1. 538) opines that "every thought is a sign". Contemporary semioticians study signs not in isolation but as part of semiotic sign systems (such as a medium or genre). They study how meanings are made, being concerned not only with communication but also with the construction and maintenance of reality. Today, both 'semiology' and 'semiotics' are regarded as semiotics.

3.1 Signification

Signification according to Saussure (1974:114) is the relationship between the two parts of the sign, which is the signifier and the signified. Barthes (1964:33) also agrees with Saussure that signification is not the 'thing', but the mental representation of the 'thing', which is the concept. He maintains that signification is the association of the signifier with the signified but points out that the association is arbitrary. Eco (1976:8) explains that "a signification system is an autonomous semiotic construct that has an abstract mode of existence independent of any possible communicative act it makes possible". A synthesis of the authors' views above on signification shows that it is the outcome of the relationship between the signifier and the signified but it will be too hasty to jump to a conclusion that such a relationship is arbitrary as noted by Barthes. An examination of the three modes of the signification as postulated by Peirce and most commonly employed within a broadly Saussurean framework will shed more light on what obtains in the relationship. They are symbol/symbolic, icon/iconic and index/indexical. However, for the purpose of this paper, effort will be channeled towards the symbolic signification.

3.1.1 Symbolic Signification

According to Chandler (2006:49), symbolic signification is a mode in which the signifier does not have any resemblance with the signified which is fundamentally arbitrary or purely conventional – that the relationship must be studied. Examples are language (alphabetical letters, punctuation marks, words, phrases and sentences), numbers, Morse code, traffic lights, national flags, etc. The symbolic signification does not have a natural link between the form and the thing represented, but only has a conventional link. The traffic sign of an inverted triangle is such symbol, as a matter of fact; it shares no natural link between its form and its meaning, ‘give right of way’. The link between its form and meaning is purely conventional. The same may be said of military emblems, the naira sign ₦, almost all flags and all languages. Thus there is no natural connection between the Yorùbá word *sá lọ* (run away) and its meaning. According to William et. al. (2004:90), the term *symbolic* as used in linguistics is understood in the sense that, by general consent, people have “agreed” upon the pairing of a particular form with a particular meaning. This sense of *symbolic* goes back to the original meaning of the Greek word *symbolon* ‘a token of recognition’ used between two guests or friends, e.g. a ring broken into two halves, which allowed them to identify each other after a long time by matching the two parts and checking whether they fit together. The two halves of the ring are inseparable, just like the form of a word and its meaning.

William et al (2004:91) further argue that symbolic signs are the exclusive prerogative of humans. In other words, other lower animals cannot make use of symbolic signs. The authors maintain that human beings have more communicative needs than pointing to things and replicating things. Also, man wants to talk about things which are more abstract in nature such as events in the past or future, objects which are distant from him, hopes about peace and a host of others. They believe that all these can only be achieved by means of symbols which humans all over the world have created for the purpose of communicating all possible thoughts.

According to Danesi (2004:31–33), a symbol stands for its referent in a conventional way. A cross figure can stand for the concept “Christianity”; white can stand for “cleanliness”, “purity”, “innocence”, and dark for “uncleanness”, “impurity” and “corruption”. The author expresses that symbolism is more prevalent in mathematics and science than any other area of human endeavour pointing out that the science of geometry, as an example, has helped human beings solve engineering dilemmas since ancient times. Symbol equally plays a role in religious life – the Cross symbolizes Christ’s death and all Christian beliefs. The Star of David represents Jewish teachings. People throughout the

world have agreed on certain symbols to serve as a shorthand system for recording and recalling information. Every branch of science has its own information system – astronomy uses a set of ancient symbols to identify the sun, the moon, the planets and the stars; in mathematics, Greek letters and other symbols make up an abbreviated language. Specific kinds of symbols appear in such fields as linguistics, commerce, engineering, medicine, packaging and transportation. All the countries of the world have official or unofficial national symbols. A flag or an anthem may symbolize a nation. In Nigeria, for example, two horses facing each other and raising their forearms to carry an eagle is the symbol for the country. The United States is symbolized by Uncle Sam and the statue of Liberty. Canada is symbolized by the maple leaf while John Bull stands for England.

Commenting on the arbitrariness of symbolic signification, Johansen and Larsen (2002:43) declare:

Negatively symbolic signs are characterized by being arbitrary, unmotivated, i.e. neither connected to the object nor similar to it. In other words, it is not their own characteristics that make them signs, as with iconic signs; nor is there a natural bond between sign and object, as with indexical signs. Instead, symbolic signs are constructed or agreed upon to be used as signs for given purposes in the internal or external world, i.e. as conventional designations with a referentiality and a meaning that are determined by conventional usage.

The authors above pinpoint that there is no relationship whatsoever between the symbolic sign and what it stands for. Language is a good example of symbolic sign. If we take the word *ewé* which translates to ‘leaf’ in English, we see that there is no bond or association in any form between the word and the object it represents. We may decide to give the same name to *igi* (tree). However, there must be a communal consensus. An illustration is given from Fágúnwà’s *Ìrìnkèrindò Nínú Igbó Elégbèje* below:

Baálè fún èèbó ní obì àbàtà méfà, èèbó la méjì sí wéwé. Ó mú òkan, ó sì ní kí wón pín iyókù kárí (p. 29)

Baálè gave six pieces of kola *acuminate* to the white man. The white man broke two into pieces, took one and asked them to share the rest among all.

In the text above, the present given to the white man (six pieces of kola *acuminate*), a particular kind of kolanut, is *àrokò*, a Yorùbá symbolic non-verbal communication. The kola is used to encode an offer of friendship by the Baálè to the Whiteman. Although both

the object (kolanuts) and the number (six) presented are symbolic, they have a great tie with what they connote in Yorùbá socio-cultural context.

4.0 Analysis

The side code is more important in this study. As mentioned earlier, Ajíkòbí (1985) argues that the side code concept is a global one and observes it from virtually every angle of human endeavour. In his investigation, left is associated with bad things while right is associated with good things. Ajikobi's argument seems linear and single sided as shall be seen in this study. Some of the novelists in this study have used the left side to communicate negative messages as shall be seen at present.

In *Ojú rí*, Ògúngbèní's auto accident has been signaled by his dashing his left foot against an object:

Ó ní kí òun bá òun kó şùgà láti Agbeni lọ Ìtaagún ní Ajéròmí. Àwọn dúnàà-dùrà, owó tó sì gbà láti san fún òun tẹ òun lórùn ni òun bá tẹlé e. Ibi tí àwọn ti fẹ kó sínú mótò òun bá yíi, òun fẹşẹ òsì kọ débi pé şòkòtò ànkàrá aláwò búlúù tí òun wò sì fàya pèrẹgẹde lábẹ. Ara rọra fu òun, òun sì fẹ padà şùgbón ọkúnrin dúdú ọhún ní kò séwu. (p.6)

He offers him to transport some sugar from Agbeni to Ìtaagún in Ajéròmí. They haggle and the sum he agrees to pay him suits him which makes him to follow him. As they are about to enter into his car, *he dashes his left foot against an object to the extent that the blue-coloured pair of trousers which he puts on tears completely underneath.* He becomes suspicious and wants to turn back but the dark-complexioned man insists there is no cause for alarm.

Ògúngbèní, a bus driver, agrees to transport some sugar for a passenger. At the point of entry into the bus, he observes a sign – *òun fẹşẹ òsì kọ* (he dashes his left foot against an object). Although he does not deliberately dash his left foot against an object in the text as seen, yet he rightly becomes suspicious because of his knowledge of the culture and the likely consequences of such a sign – *ará rọra fu òun* (he becomes slightly suspicious that the journey may turn awry). Ògúngbèní disregards the symbol and follows the passenger who assures him of a safe trip. He, however, ends up in a ghastly motor accident that costs him his bus and also incapacitates him physically. The act of dashing the left foot against an object by Ògúngbèní portrayed in the text is a symbolic signification of disaster as manifested in the ghastly auto crash and the injury sustained therein.

Also, in *Ìrìnkèrindò Nínú Igbó Elégbèje*, the author makes use of left side to discuss a strange community:

A rí ọ̀nà kékeré kan báyi tí ó yà bá apá òsì lọ. Nwón kọ àkólé kan sí iyànà náà... ilú àwọn Èdidàré níbití Òmùgòdiméjì ti nşẹ ọ̀ba wón' (p.38)

We see a small road *that leads to the left hand-side*. They place a signboard at the junction of the road... 'The town of Èdidàré where Òmùgòdiméjì is their king'

The author's description of the lifestyles of the people of Èdidàré, headed by Òmùgòdiméjì shows something contrary to the entire culture of the Yorùbá people. This may not be unconnected with where the community is situated – *tí ó yà bá apá òsì lọ* (that leads to the left hand side). The left-sidedness is a symbolic signification of lopsidedness and chaos in the behaviour exuded by the inhabitants of Èdidàré community.

In *Ògbójú ọ̀dẹ Nínú Igbó Irúnmọ̀lẹ̀*, Àkàrà Oògùn dashes his left foot against an object before he enters into the cave of a weird creature that captures him:

Dídìdè ti mo dide, ẹ̀şẹ̀ òsì ni mo fì kọ, ẹ̀şẹ̀ iyá mi ni, ìgbàkígba tí mo bá ti fì ẹ̀şẹ̀ náà kọ sí ǹkan kan, ǹkan náà kò ní dára... ibi tí mo ti ǹ şe ẹ̀yí ni mo déédé rí i tí ẹ̀nikan dì mí ní ọ̀wọ̀ ọ̀tún mú tí ó sì lọ mi ní apá sẹ̀yìn tí ó gbá mi ní etí. (p. 21)

As I rise to go, *I dash my left foot against an object*, it is my mother's leg, anytime I dash that foot against an object on any particular thing, it would turn out negative... As I'm doing this I suddenly see someone who holds my right hand, turns my arm to my back and slaps me.

In the text above, dashing the left foot against an object is the signifier to the character; the signified concept is a negative outcome of his journey in the forest. Truly, the character is later apprehended by a gnome who beats and chains him up in a cave. A sign is a recognizable association of a signifier with a particular signified. The same signifier (dashing the left foot against an object) could stand for a different signified (and thus be a different sign). If, for instance, someone had promised Àkàrà Oògùn, some money and on his way to collect the money he dashed his left foot against an object, then the same signifier would signify disappointment.

In the investigation of this researcher concerning the left hand side position of the bride beside the groom, Ọ̀lájùwón¹ explained that the culture dates back to the pre-colonial Yorùbá life when war or any form of attack may break out anytime. The husband, she asserted, would hold the weapon with which the wife was protected with the right hand while the wife was on the left hand side of the husband.

Contrarily, Fálétí (1972:34) asserts that “*Ọba oko ní í fowó òtún mú irùkèrè, ọwó òsì l’ọba gidi í firùkèrè sī*” (It is the king who is a rustic that holds the horse-tail with his right hand; an important king holds the horse-tail with his left hand). This assertion is peculiar to the Ọyó kingdom and may not be unconnected with the Ọyó proverb which says: “*Ají-še-bí-Ọyó là á rí, Ọyó ò ní í še bí i baba ẹnikòòkan*” (People copy Ọyó’s attitudes, the Ọyó do not copy anyone). The act of holding the horse-tail with the left hand by the Ọyó king may portray arrogance on the part of the Ọyó and also to set a pace which other kings in the Yorùbáland may follow. However, during ceremonial periods when a king appears in state in his full regalia especially with his lead or bead staff (*ọpá òjé tabí ọpá ìlẹkẹ*), it becomes expedient that he holds the horse-tail with his left hand because the staff is held with the right hand.

Also, among biological organs, the heart has been noted to be one of the most important organs in the body. Macdonald (2009:95) maintains that the heart “is usually felt to be on the left side because the left heart (left ventricle) is stronger as it pumps to all body parts”. This may not be unconnected with why warriors shoot their enemies, aiming at the left side of the chest where the heart is situated so as to hasten their death, noting the delicate nature of the heart. The location of the heart on the left side by the Supreme Being is undoubtedly natural which may force an analyst to pitch his tent with the side; contrastively, human beings’ innovation is based on culture and conventions which may not be easily invalidated by anyone because it is a communal property.

On the other hand, something positive is done in relation to the right hand-side. In *Şaworoide*, during the coronation anniversary of Lápité, the winners in the dancing competition are placed on the right hand side.

Ọgá àwọn onişé àşà bó síwájú. Ó bá àwọn ọmọdé náà sọrọ. Ó ní “*Ẹ kókó pàtẹwó fún ara yín. Gbogbo yín lẹ şe dáadáa, gbogbo yín ni ẹ ó sì gba ẹbùn... gbogbo yín ẹ tò sí ọwó òtún mi kí ẹ máa gba ẹbùn yín o*”. (pp.98-99).

The head of the culture workers comes forward. He speaks with the children. He says, “Firstly clap for yourselves. All of you did very well; all of you will collect prizes... All of you should *line up on my right hand side* and collect your prizes.

The head of the culture workers separates the children who know how to dance very well from those who do not. He makes these good dancers to line up – *ẹ tò sí ọwó òtún mi* (line up on my right hand side) for their various prizes. The positioning of winners on a right hand side is truly significant in the text. It is a symbolic signification of success as manifested in the competition.

Right-hand side is also associated with royalty. In *Şaworoide*, Amawomárò tutors Arèsèjàbàtá:

Òtún ni kí o máa tẹ filà sí o. Òtún lomọ oba á tẹ é sí. Ó ti dára báyií. Hèn-èn-èn. Bí ijó bá pọ, tó bá yè, kí o tún rọra tún un şe. Ó yá máa wá lọ (p.100).

You should be tilting your cap to the right hand side. The right hand side is where the prince tilts his cap. It is good like this. That's alright. If it slips due to serious dancing, gently put it right. Now be on your way.

Amawomárò tries to teach the young prince, Arèsèjàbàtá, one of the norms that sets him aside from other members of the society – *Òtún ni kí o máa tẹ filà sí o* (you should be tilting your cap to the right hand side). Amawomárò provides an explanation – *Òtún lomọ oba á tẹ é sí* (the right hand side is where the prince tilts his cap). This is a symbolic signification which distinguishes the prince from a non-prince in the Yorùbá society.

Some authors have not followed the convention of putting positive things on their right-hand side and negative things on their left. This is seen in *Ojú rí*.

Bàba Fádípè gbọ ọrọ wọn délẹ. Ó wá gbé ọpẹlẹ rẹ síta, ó sọrọ wúyewúyẹ sí owó ẹyọ kan, ó sì kó àti owó ẹyọ àti eegun ẹran kan fún Rúùtù pé kí ó di ọkọ̀ọkan mó ọwọ̀ kọ̀ọkan. Bàbá gbé ọpẹlẹ janlẹ lẹ̀ẹmeji, ó ní kí Rúùtù sọ ohun tí ó bá wà ni ọwọ̀ òsì rẹ sílẹ, ló bá di owó ẹyọ. Bàbá Fádípè rẹ̀rìn ín, ó kí wọn kú orí ire. (pp.97-98).

Bàbá Fádípè listens to their story till the end. He then brings out his ọpẹlẹ; he speaks quietly to a cowry, and he now gives both the cowry and a piece of bone to Ruth to hold each of them in each of her hands. Baba casts his ọpẹlẹ divination on the ground twice; he asks Ruth to put down the item inside her left fist which turns out to be the cowry. Bàbá Fádípè smiles and congratulates them.

In Ifá divination, Abimbólá (1977: vii) explains the meaning and process of casting lots with a cowry and a piece of bone after an Ifá priest has conducted his investigation. Casting lots is to make the Ifá priest have a deeper knowledge of the investigation and also to determine a particular person or thing that Ifá is speaking about. He points out that cowry stands for a positive thing while a piece of bone represents a negative thing. Bàbá Fádípè deviates from the conventional concept of left and right – *ó ní kí Rúùtù sọ ohun tí ó bá wà ni ọwọ̀ òsì rẹ sílẹ, ló bá di owó ẹyọ* (he asks Ruth to put down the item inside her left hand which turns out to be the cowry). *Owó ẹyọ* (cowry) which signifies positive, in a conventional pattern, ought to be on the right hand side. However, divination and choice

of selection of items clasped in the hand/palm in casting lots might have been dictated by the oracle beyond the visible customs.

Some authors in some instances have allowed both the right and the left to work together to achieve success. In *Şaworoide*:

Gbogbo àwọn èrò n̄ garùn, w̄on f̄e fi ojú ara w̄on rí iṣèlè n̄lá n̄áà. Àwọn tó jókòò ti dide d̄urò. Àwọn onílù d̄undún ti gbé ilú kó èjìkà, w̄on ti mú òpá l̄owó danindanin. Àyánniyì, n̄áà ti ká apá agbádá sókè, *ó n̄ f̄i owó òsì ra oşán saworoide, ó f̄i owó òtún gbá òpá mú girí* (p.184).

All the people in the crowd are stretching their necks; they want to witness the great event. Those who sat down have stood up. The d̄undún drummers have hung their drums on their shoulders and held their drumstick tightly. Àyánniyì also has folded up the arm of his *agbádá* dress. *He is using his left hand to rub the strings of leather of brass bells and the right hand to hold the drumstick.*

In the final ousting of the military dictator, L̄agàta, the drummer, Àyánniyì, makes use of his two hands – *ó n̄ f̄i owó òsì ra oşán saworoide, ó f̄i owó òtún gbá òpá mú girí* (he is using the left hand to rub the strings of leather of brassbells and the right hand to hold the drumstick) in the communication of the message to the hearing of the military dictator which causes headache that finally results to his death. The binary principle is at work here as this indicates that the left and right are rather complementary and both work together for positive reconstruction of the society

5.0 Conclusion

Side code, a form of non-verbal communication in Yorùbá as depicted in some selected Yorùbá novels has been critically examined in this study foregrounded the theory of semiotics using the concept of symbolic signification. It is noteworthy to mention that the theory of semiotics which is for communication and signification is culture bound; it operates within the confinement of the culture of a particular social reality and, may not signify its referent outside such culture. This study unravels the code of right and left as it operates in Yorùbá socio-cultural milieu as expressed by Yorùbá novelists, most times negative events do occur at the left hand side. For instance, dashing the left foot against an object results in a car crash inflicting a permanent damage on the victim; events that are strange and run contrary to the Yorùbá culture occur in a community situated on the left side. Contrarily, pleasant events occur on the right hand side. For instance, winners in competitions are lined up on the right hand side; princes tilt their caps on the right hand side. It is also uncovered that some novelists are not aware (or do not care) about the right

and left-sidedness while some apply both the right and the left for positive output and reconstruction of the society which is the attitude of the Yorùbá people.

Notes

1. Mrs. Ọmótáyò Olújùwón (Ìya Tópé Agbèbí) is a Yorùbá traditional midwife, one of my respondents who lives at number 2, Ikogbẹ Street, Ibà, Lagos, Nigeria, was interviewed on 18th of March, 2009.

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